



Learning from the Election

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

On Nov. 19, 1854, General Sam Houston was baptized in Little Rocky Creek in Washington County. He also joined the Independence Baptist Church that day. Gen. Houston took these steps at the urging of his wife and mother-in-law, who both desperately wanted Gen. Houston to moderate his habits, and to live a more sober and devout life.

I've always believed in periodic re-evaluations, and in course corrections as the results warrant. For those of us entrusted with public office, there is nothing like an election to provide information on what changes are needed.

The election results were a powerful reminder of who works for whom in our democracy. We work for the people—not the other way around. Public officials must adhere to our principles and beliefs, but we also should remember who we work for, and who has the final say.

On Nov. 7, control of both houses of Congress was turned over from the Republicans to the Democrats. It's safe to say that voters made a similar judgment about the way things were going in Washington as that of Houston's wife and mother-in-law. They wanted change.

As a Republican, I've been asked what I learned from this election. My short answer is this: our principles are sound, but we've strayed from them. Complaints about complacency and non-responsiveness reached critical levels. Business as usual in Washington frustrated a growing number of voters, and the majority party was held accountable.

One source of frustration was the re-emergence of "earmarks," projects for their own districts sponsored by individual lawmakers. This "pork-barrel" spending was attacked by Republicans in their successful 1994 Contract With America, and a cleanup soon followed.

But in recent years, with Republicans in charge of Congress, earmarks have returned with a vengeance. The Congressional Research Service counted some 16,500 earmarks in 2005 spending bills, at a cost of almost \$50 billion. This is unconscionable, and the public knows it. I hope Congress knows it now, too.

I've heard many complaints about backroom deals and secrecy in Washington, both in Congress and the rest of government. I've long believed the public should have far more information about the way decisions are made, so they can make an informed judgment. In the coming Congressional session, I plan to work across party lines to open up access to government information, particularly through reform of the Freedom of Information Act.

I believe voters were also angry at our seeming inability to come to grips with the even bigger problems of overspending, particularly on entitlements. Health care costs in Medicaid and Medicare are rising at a double-digit rate, and the huge Baby Boomer population is preparing to retire and receive Social Security payments. Yet proposals for reforming these entitlements—to the dismay of many—have become bogged down in partisan bickering.

Another major factor in the election was documented cases of unethical behavior by Congressmen, their aides, and lobbyists that in some instances crossed over into outright criminal conduct. Of course, officials from both major political parties were caught up in these charges. But the voters rightly demanded change, and the party in power was held accountable.

Frustration over Iraq was also part of the election. Some Democrats have called for a withdrawal from Iraq, either immediately or through a set timetable. In my view, that is not the correct course of action, nor is it in the long-term interest of our country or the world.

Most Americans realize that Iraq is part of a larger war against Islamic terrorism, what some have called the major struggle of the 21st Century. They realize the conflict will be long, and costly, but they know it is a battle that must be joined to ensure the safety and security of our country.

I believe the American people are looking for confidence that we have a plan to win this war, not merely to carry it on. President Bush is now re-evaluating our approach. My hope is that Democrats, now in a Congressional majority, take their criticism of our Iraq operation to a positive level, and work constructively with the President on a plan to win the war against terrorism.

Some commentators have suggested Republicans lost the majority because we were too conservative, and others have said we have not been conservative enough. In my view, the core Republican principles remain sound: limited government, individual responsibility, and opportunity for all. We have to do a better job in the future of advocating, and delivering, on these principles.

I am privileged today to occupy the U.S. Senate seat first held by Sam Houston, a man whose career in public service for our state and its people will likely never be matched. Gen. Houston was serving in the U.S. Senate when he was baptized at the Independence Baptist Church.

The church pew in Independence where Houston sat during services has been preserved so that visitors may view it. It serves as a testimony to man's power to turn weakness into strength, and his ability to learn from missteps of the past. That power is as strong today as it was 150 years ago.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns:
www.cornyn.senate.gov/column